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Science Fiction Writer

Ex-CIA 'Spook' Finds A Niche At Helm Of University In Chico

By Jim Haynes
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CHICO — Can a former CIA "spook" who is also a science fiction writer, an 18th-century English literature scholar and a "knee-jerk liberal" find fulfillment in a small Sacramento Valley town?

Absolutely, said California State University, Chico, President Robin Wilson, who arrived in Chico three years ago "unshaven and spent the first night camping in Lassen."

While the 54-year-old college administrator is not exactly a drifter, he readily admits he has moved 22 times in his adult life and is teased by friends "that I just can't hold a good job."

Wilson, who has held a "good job" as president of the 14,000-student university at Chico since 1980, recently described his background in an interview with The Bee and discussed some of the achievements, frustrations and general impressions of his tenure here.

The CSUC president began his career climb in academia after spending eight years with the Central Intelligence Agency in Berlin and Washington, D.C.

He joined the CIA in 1959 "during the height of the Cold War. I was in clandestine operations, the real spook part of the service, and it was an exciting time," Wilson said.

Later he was transferred to the agency's intelligence-gathering division at CIA headquarters in McLean, Va., where "we did all the crystal ball reading ... and I became something of an expert on the Soviet Union."

But that was also a period of great "internal struggle," Wilson said. A self-described "(Adlai) Stevensonian knee-jerk liberal," he left the CIA at the peak of American involvement in Vietnam.

"The U.S. adventure in Southeast Asia had a considerable impact on me," Wilson said. However, the CIA experience left no bitterness: "I don't regret my time in the CIA at all," he said.

It was during his CIA service in Berlin that Wilson decided he "needed a hobby and first turned to making photo enlargements, but somehow that didn't quite do it."

Wilson had earned a Ph.D. in English from the University of Illinois with a dissertation on 18th century English novelist Henry Fielding and finally turned to writing fiction himself.

He wrote his first story, "The Third Alternative," which was published in the science fiction journal Analog in 1964.

"They sent me a check for \$360 and I thought, 'This is it. Where have I been all this time?'" But later written stories did not sell so readily nor publishers' checks arrive frequently, and a budding author never depended on fiction writing to make a living.

About 25 of Wilson's stories and short novels — mostly science fiction — have been published, but "you can imagine how many I wrote that didn't get published. I had the usual trunk full," he said.

In his first academic position after leaving the CIA, Wilson was a professor of English at Clarion State College in Pennsylvania, where he also pursued his interest in creative writing by founding the Clarion Writers Workshop (which is now at Michigan State University).

Other academic posts, mostly administrative, led him to Ohio State University in 1977 and then to CSUC in 1980.

In Chico, Wilson said, he has found his niche. "You're talking to the major town booster."

The attraction of Chico itself, Wilson said, has mostly offset the difficulty of recruiting a quality faculty during the current economic squeeze on California's educational establishment. "The only thing that saves us is Chico, the town," he said.

There is some friction between the campus and the city, Wilson acknowledged.

Chico's non-student residents complain regularly about loud noise, rowdy beer busts and parking problems near the student fraternity houses, for example. City officials are considering a zoning action to restrict sorority and fraternity houses to one area south of the campus.

Wilson said he understands the problem. "I live next door to a dorm myself and I get beer cans thrown in the yard."

But, he added, in most cases, the students who live off campus are "old enough to drink, vote and bear arms," and there is little control the university can exercise.

Wilson said he believes the university has made major strides in two areas during his tenure: affirmative action and grade deflation.

Of the 73 tenure appointments made at CSUC since he arrived, 65 percent have gone to men and 35 percent to women, compared with an overall faculty ratio of 80 percent men and 20 percent women.

The university is also making progress in hiring minority faculty members despite being "remote from the (mixed ethnic) pool," he said. "We have just filled two deanships with a native American and Hispanic. And we didn't hire them just for that. One has degrees from Columbia and Harvard and the other from Stanford."

As a result of an effort to reverse creeping grade inflation, the grade point average for CSUC students has dropped from 3 to 2.6 on a 4-point scale since 1980, Wilson said.

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